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Fashioning Society: An Exploration of Collective Behaviour and Cultural Change Through Symbolic Interactionism

GABRIELA AMBÁS
Universidad Panamericana, México; Universidad de Navarra, Spain
Email: gambas@up.edu.mx

PAULA GÁRGOLES
Universidad Panamericana, México
Email: pgargoles@up.edu.mx

The intersection of fashion, collective behaviour and the philosophical tradition of symbolic interactionism (SI) is explored through this article, highlighting how fashion serves as a key mechanism in social interaction and cultural change. Drawing from the intellectual tradition of SI, developed by Mead and Blumer, this study demonstrates how fashion facilitates collective adaptation and construction of meaning in a cultural landscape that is continually changing. Fashion is analysed not only as a vehicle for individual expression but as a significant social object that embodies symbols, signs and shared meanings. Through social interaction, these meanings are constructed, deconstructed, and continuously reshaped, influencing both personal identities and broader social structures. By analysing fashion's role in collective selection and its potential for societal transformation, the findings of this article reveal fashion's capacity to introduce new cultural models, challenge established norms, and guide upcoming social dynamics. These insights highlight how fashion holds a relevant influence in shaping cultural imaginaries, constructing collective meanings, and driving social change.

Keywords: fashion, symbolic interactionism, meaning, collective selection, social change

INTRODUCTION

Philosophical studies and theories of fashion have proliferated since the late 19th century (Kang 2020): from Thorstein Veblen's (1899) trickle-down effect, Georg Simmel's (1923) duality of imitation and differentiation, and John Carl Flügel's (1964) psychoanalytic theory of clothing to Roland Barthes' (1967) semiotic approach to the fashion system, Jean Baudrillard's (1974) take on modernity, and Gilles Lipovetsky's (1990) ephemeral understanding of fashion (Grewal 2022).

These theories, while immensely contributing to the validation of fashion as an academic discipline, have overlooked the possibility of social change through the relational and semiological nature of fashion. This void in research calls for a re-examination of the fashion system, particularly through the lens of Herbert Blumer's (1969) insights within the tradition of Symbolic Interactionism (SI).

This study aims to reveal how SI, grounded in American pragmatist philosophy, offers a unique framework for understanding how fashion, collective behaviour, and semiotics intersect to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct social structures. By revisiting Blumer's approach to fashion through SI, this research seeks to shed light on fashion's role in shaping social dynamics and its capacity to both reflect and challenge existing norms.

The text is divided into five sections to accompany the reader through the theoretical frames that construct the key insights of the research. In that way, fashion, collective behaviour and Symbolic Interactionism within the philosophical tradition of pragmatism intersect through their shared focus on the construction and negotiation of social meaning. Fashion, therefore, operates as a social object imbued with symbols and meanings that are continuously reshaped through collective interaction.

THE PRAGMATIST TRADITION IN THE SCHOOL OF CHICAGO

Pragmatism started to emerge at the end of the 19th century as an original wave of American philosophy that spread rapidly and influenced many emerging social science disciplines. It took shape by weaving together various intellectual contributions and was finally consolidated at the University of Chicago, between 1894 and 1904, by John Dewey and George Herbert Mead (Picó, Serra 2010).

Philosophical pragmatism emerged as the dominant school of thought at the time, significantly influencing both the University of Chicago and European intellectual traditions (Reyes Morris 2011). For pragmatist thinkers, knowledge was derived from experience and social action. As a result, voluntary interaction – which lies in the core of human nature – shaped institutions and either transformed or maintained the social order.

Pragmatism rejects speculation when it is detached from practical activities, and Chicago intellectuals followed this line in almost all their empirical studies by focusing on group structures and relations, life histories, and social interactions within communities. The individual, then, is perceived as active in relation to the environment, which in turn is shaped by the individual's actions; similarly, the individual adapts and remains flexible to fit the environment. This relationship between the two is characterised by interaction and mutual influence (Carabaña, Lamo de Espinosa 1978).

This philosophical doctrine affirms that human thought and action are driven by the need to respond to problems. Human beings think and act in order to reduce the tensions between individuals and the environment. Therefore, ideas are tools that people use to face the world, and they are not developed according to an internal logic, but in social interaction with others (Dewey 1916). The value of ideas lies in their practical relevance. Pragmatism's influence on the School of Chicago is evident, then, in its focus on the specific and concrete rather than the abstract, and in its perspective of the dialectical relationship between individual and society.

G. H. Mead, as one of the main authors of the pragmatist tradition, described human behaviour as intrinsically social (Mead 1934). Behaviour is studied in terms of organised conduct within one or more social groups. In this way, the process of construction of the social

imaginary is done through the individual's belonging in a social group and through his capacity to create symbols and interpret the behaviour of others. Therefore, individuals and institutions are part of a shared construction, connected through symbolic mediation. For Mead, symbolic communication is the process by which individuals learn the values and meanings that make up the cultural heritage of their group.

Philosophical pragmatism also influenced the development of Symbolic Interactionism by Mead, who was a key member of the School of Chicago's first generation, and subsequently by his student, Herbert Blumer, who belonged to the School's third generation. This theory took as its reference and object of study the city of Chicago, since it was an excellent social laboratory to study the dynamics and conflicts of the growing modern city and, above all, because of the cultural fusion caused by the strong presence of immigrants that created a clash of values between traditional cultures and the modern world (Reyes Morris 2011).

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Symbolic interactionism (SI), which was first introduced by Mead (1934) and later expanded by Blumer (1969), proposes that individuals engage with each other through symbols that carry specific meanings. For symbolic interactionists, words are the most important symbols, since people communicate by using them as a common ground. However, other elements of human behaviour, such as facial expressions, body gestures and fashion items, also hold symbolic value (Lennon et al. 2014).

The individual – along with their relationships with themselves, their community and the environment – serves as both the protagonist and interpreter of social life in the SI tradition. Human beings engage in social interaction not only with others but also through self-interaction, shaping their actions based on the interpretations they construct from various situations, rather than simply responding automatically (Blumer 1969). This process grants individuals the ability to assign and reassign meanings, even to the point of discarding previously accepted meanings (Piga, De Domenico 2023). The symbolic nature of social life, therefore, becomes a central element in the study and analysis of social relations.

In the School of Chicago, Herbert Blumer consolidated the intellectual foundation for the symbolic interactionist tradition and developed its methodological approach. Blumer eventually replaced Mead as a professor and became one of the main interpreters of SI. He considered social action as the main topic of his research and was focused on the fluid and negotiating character of interaction within the social order.

In his work *Symbolic Interactionism* (1969: 2), Blumer stipulated the main premises of this philosophical theory:

1. Humans act according to the meanings that they attribute to the objects and situations in their environment.

2. The meanings of these objects derive from the social interaction that an individual has with other actors.

3. These meanings are used as a process of interpretation carried out by the individual in his or her relationship with the things that he or she encounters, and are able to be modified through this process.

Thus, the SI tradition emphasises the perspective of individuals as active agents in their environment (Stryker 1980). They express themselves through action, using the socially constructed meanings from their interactions as tools and guides for shaping their behaviour. Likewise, the interactionist perspective conceives communication as an act of meaning production

that takes place within a symbolic dimension. This indicates that social meanings are created through shared understanding within interconnected networks (Taylor, Bogdan 2010).

By interpreting and defining the contribution of each participant of the social sphere, individuals can understand the origin and impact of the overall social act. This gives each participant a guide for understanding others' actions and helps them align their own actions accordingly (Blumer 1966). Therefore, the principle of social reality suggested by SI indicates that 'everything interacts with everything else' (Gadea 2018: 50), and ultimately what exists are permanent relations of movement.

These dynamic relations are able to be modified by their same interpreters, allowing a forever changing and fluid process of interpretation by social interaction depending on the social, political and historical context. In that sense, Blumer (1966: 538) states that 'in the flow of social life, there are countless moments in which participants mutually redefine their actions'.

Essentially, the philosophical theories of the School of Chicago are capable of explaining not only interpretation and social change within small groups, but also, as evidenced by its analyses of collective behaviour, all forms of social change (Carabaña 1978). Nevertheless, before expanding on the possibility of societal transformation through interaction, it is essential to briefly address two key concepts within symbolic interactionism: ethnography and semiotics.

Ethnography, as a qualitative research methodology, has been fundamental for SI scholars due to its participating observation, which enables the recording of actions and interactions of individuals in their natural settings and contexts (Rizo 2004). In order to understand the complex intertwining of the relations that construct the meanings of the world, researchers have to conduct on-site and active investigations within specific communities.

According to Blumer (1973: 798), 'in studying human conduct or human group life the theoretical shaping of the problem must be done through an on-going, flexible, shifting examination of the empirical field, itself, in order to set the problem correctly'. Therefore, an active observation, within the pragmatist philosophical tradition, is key in order to observe objects and situations with the same meaning with which the individual sees them.

To fully understand an actor's behaviour and conception of the world, researchers must enter their reality and perceive the world from their perspective (Castro-León 2021). In contemporary research, netnography (Kozinets 2010) has emerged as a vital methodology to study the relationships, interactions and the creation of meanings within digital communities (Gordillo-Rodriguez et al. 2023). Meanwhile, semiology works as the vehicle through which meanings are constructed in social interactions. According to Charles Sanders Peirce (1977), we do not perceive or interpret the world directly, but through signs. The meaning of things is constructed within a triangular relationship between the sign, the object, and the reference or thought. In this way, thinking occurs within a community where signs connect individuals, and through this connection, the world's view is co-created.

In every human interaction, verbal and nonverbal signs are exchanged between participants through a process of encoding and decoding (Squicciarino, Aja 2012). These signals allow individuals to classify and understand each other based on factors like age, gender, ethnicity, political and religious affiliation, social class, and profession. The construction of meaning, then, is shaped by socially learned patterns that are continually reinforced or reconstructed. Meaning is defined by how symbols are socially used to facilitate cooperation in group activities (Carabaña 1978). Thus, meaning is closely tied to the practical outcomes of communication, acting as the key element that coordinates social actions.

Additionally, since individuals have the ability to act as symbolic beings, they are capable of manipulating signs and symbols to shape situations and behaviours to which they assign meaning. Therefore, social construction of meaning can be modified according to the conditions under which interactions between individuals take place (Ritzer 2002).

Communication, interactions and collective constructions of meaning are as universal and broad as society. Therefore, the field of social relations and the field of language are coexistent. In that sense, the philosopher and semiologist Roland Barthes created a theory for fashion as communication in the framework for linguistics and semiotics.

THE FASHION SYSTEM

Blumer stated by 1969 that language could be considered as a social object due to its ability to create common meanings through SI: 'all objects are social products since they are formed and transformed through the defining process of symbolic interaction' (Blumer 1969: 69). And fashion items are no different.

Roland Barthes extended the field of semiotics to all objects that contain meaning, including clothing. By following Ferdinand de Saussure's key approach to modern linguistics and semiology, Barthes replicated the framework of general and specific semiotics in language to the structure of the Fashion System. In doing so, he became the first to identify and name the 'Fashion System' in 1967, aligning its structure with that of language, as can be seen in the Table.

Table. **Comparison between the structure of the Fashion System and linguistics**

	Linguistics/Saussure	**Fashion/Barthes**
General	Language	Clothing
Specific	Speech	Dress

Authors' elaboration.

In that way, Barthes (1990) compares Saussure's concept of language – the institutional set of rules that governs linguistics – to clothing, as the socially accepted and normalised rules in fashion. On the other hand, he establishes a clear parallel between the concept of speech – how individuals apply the rules of language in their personal contexts – and dress, which refers to the personalised interpretation of clothing norms.

For Barthes, the Fashion System consists in collectively constructed meanings and norms that have the ability to change depending on the social context, interactions and new negotiations of meaning. In fashion, collectively accepted norms are created through social interactions regarding symbolically charged items such as clothing and accessories.

FASHION UNDER THE PERSPECTIVE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

For SI, symbols are understood as social objects that represent, signify or occupy the place of anything that a group or person has agreed to represent (Posada Zapata, Carmona Parra 2021). The relationship to these symbols is, therefore, reflexive, since the object itself does not intrinsically carry meaning. Instead, the meaning is assigned through the individual's or collective's interaction with the object or through the intended message they wish to communicate (Squicciarino, Aja 2012).

The safety pin, for example, has been a long-standing symbol for the punk movement. Emerging in the United Kingdom during the late 1970s among social discontent of the youth sector, punk became a social and cultural movement of protest, provocation and imagination. It impacted areas from fashion, design and music, to politics, literature and arts. In terms of style, the punk movement was launched by designers Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, promoted by music bands like Sex Pistols and The Clash, and consisted of ripped shirts, safety pins, studs, spikes and mohawks.

Safety pins are an excellent example of SI in fashion due to the strong symbolic meaning that the creators of the punk movement – consciously or subconsciously – granted them. Since the movement was antagonistic to the social order that prevailed until then, punks wanted to dismantle the established system in order to reinvent it on their own terms. Therefore, traditional garments were ripped and put back together with safety pins, symbolising the reconstruction of society.

Likewise, fashion items can be used as extensions of bodily perceptions, acting as symbolical enhancements of the individual. For example, crowns were historically worn to increase the perception of height, creating an impression of dominance and emphasising the figure of power. In a similar way, crinolines in the 19th century symbolised the spatial expansion of upper-class women, reflecting their social position and opulence. Shoulder pads in suits, on the other hand, have been used to emphasise masculinity and strength (Squicciarino, Aja 2012).

In that sense, the body itself can also be considered a linguistic structure. It 'speaks' (Abercrombie 1968: 55) and reveals multiple layers of information even though the individual stays silent. And, if our body communicates, fashion – as an extension of our physical body and internal consciousness and individuality – can also convey meaning (Günay 2021). By working as vehicles of social interactions, both the body and clothing can bridge the gap between our inner sense of self and the social world we navigate.

Clothing and accessories have been used, through social consensus, as symbols that carry larger and deeper meanings than their physical forms. The fashion system, through SI, 'offers creative opportunities for consumers to personalize and reconstruct the meanings of social objects' (Kaiser et al. 1991: 169). The management of appearance, then, becomes an intentional act of expressing identities, revealing and embodying meanings that would otherwise be difficult to communicate through language. The fashion-meaning codes – which are fluid and perpetually changing – are drawn from cultural imaginaries and are triggered by combinations of key elements such as fabric, texture, color, pattern, volume and silhouette (Davis 1985).

Symbolic interactionism has always fostered attention to social processes, symbolic objects and negotiation. Therefore, it provides a framework for understanding how cultural categories are continuously deconstructed and reconstructed, and how these mechanisms unfold in daily life (Kaiser et al. 1995). In that context, fashion offers concrete tools for the construction of meaning in relation to self-perception and social identities.

Following that line, symbolic interactionists like Herbert Blumer (1969), Spencer E. Cahill (1989), Fred Davis (1985, 1988) and Gregory P. Stone (1970, 1977) have focused their attention on fashion since the 1960s. Meanwhile, John Flügel (1964) applied for the first time the psychoanalytic theory to the fashion phenomenon, enhancing the symbolic value of clothing as an appendix of the self; and Jean Baudrillard (1974) analysed fashion consumption in terms of semantics.

In contemporary society, the increasing emphasis on visual imagery over verbal expression has enhanced the symbolic relevance of clothing. As a unique method of encoding information, fashion has become more than 'simple' garments and accessories; it functions as a complex system of signs that communicates meaning. Recent semiological investigations have raised awareness to this phenomenon, recognising clothing as a form of communication and an intricate visual language. This new perspective emphasises that clothing not only reflects personal identity but also conveys cultural, social and even political messages.

COLLECTIVE SELECTION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN FASHION

Through social interaction, fashion has the ability to reaffirm or reshape previously established meanings that construct social and cultural imaginaries. These are defined by Cornelius Castoriadis (1995) as a conceptual framework of signs and symbols that gives meaning to the actions of subjects and collectivities. In that sense, for example, safety pins carry a specific symbolic meaning that accompanies the social and cultural imaginary surrounding punk.

Shared meanings in cultural imaginaries guide most of our actions and allow us to predict, to a large extent, the behaviour of others (Rose 1962). Since the definition of these meanings depends on social interactions, culture – serving as the framework through which we understand the world – is constantly 'in the making' (Fine 1987: 7). Language, fashion items and artistic expressions, as symbolic objects, are powerful resources for the co-creation of new social imaginaries.

In that sense, fashion is the key for the construction of social change through collective processes of negotiation. Blumer (1969) analysed the social role of fashion in facilitating and supporting collective adaptation in an ever-changing world filled with multiple possibilities. By allowing the appearance of new possible frameworks, but by subjecting them to the challenges of competition and collective selection, the fashion system provides a constant way of adjusting to upcoming trends and changes. For example, the urge for transparency and sustainability from contemporary consumers has helped to construct a new collective narrative of circular fashion (Bartkutė et al. 2023).

Collective action and social change become possible when the 'social value' (Thomas, Znaniecki 2006: 110) of fashion is taken into account within the diverse processes of meaning construction. The symbolic nature of clothing, accessories and language within the fashion system plays a crucial role in shaping and reshaping social dynamics. According to Blumer (1969: 50), fashion 'in a collective sense, enables us to detach from the past, identify with the present, and anticipate the future'.

CONCLUSIONS

Fashion operates as a critical mechanism for social interaction and collective adaptation within the philosophical tradition of symbolic interactionism. Power relationships and social practices are forged through collective action that creates frameworks of meaning. These meanings are continually negotiated through interaction and help individuals – and society as a whole – to navigate the complexities of an ever-evolving cultural landscape.

Designers, consumers, innovators, trend-setters and followers are the protagonists of the social interactions that can modify meanings within the cultural imaginaries. Fashion's role in collective selection is essential for both maintaining and challenging the status quo.

Through its capacity to introduce new models of thought and subject them to social scrutiny, fashion offers multiple possibilities for social change.

As this study demonstrates, the symbolic nature of fashion extends beyond mere aesthetics and becomes deeply intertwined with social values, collective behaviour and identity formation. By understanding fashion through the lens of symbolic interactionism, we gain insight into the dynamic processes that shape not only individual expression but also broader collective transformations.

Through both language and fashion, as well as the language that is used in fashion, we can change collective imaginaries through positive social interactions. Ultimately, what we wear – and how we discuss what we wear – holds the potential to influence and even change the world.

As a final note, this research is not without its limitations. The theoretical focus on symbolic interactionism may benefit from further empirical validation across diverse cultural contexts to deepen its global applicability. Future research could explore the role of digital and virtual spaces in reshaping the symbolic meanings of fashion and their impact on social dynamics in the contemporary era.

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GABRIELA AMBÁS, PAULA GÁRGOLES

Mados visuomenė: kolektyvinio elgesio ir kultūrinių pokyčių tyrinėjimas simbolinio interakcionizmo požiūriu

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama mados, kolektyvinio elgesio ir filosofinės simbolinio interakcionizmo (SI) tradicijos sankirta, pabrėžiant, kad mada yra pagrindinis socialinės sąveikos ir kultūrinių pokyčių mechanizmas. Remiantis intelektualine SI tradicija, kurią sukūrė George'as Herbertas Meadas ir Herbertas Blumeris, parodoma, kaip mada palengvina kolektyvinį prisitaikymą ir prasmės kūrimą nuolat besikeičiančiame kultūriniame kraštovaizdyje. Mada analizuojama ne tik kaip individualios raiškos priemonė, bet ir kaip reikšmingas socialinis objektas, įkūnijantis simbolius, ženklus ir bendras reikšmes. Socialinės sąveikos metu šios reikšmės yra konstruojamos, dekonstruojamos ir nuolatos pertvarkomos, darydamos įtaką tiek asmeniniam tapatumui, tiek platesnėms socialinėms struktūroms. Analizuojant mados vaidmenį kolektyvinėje atrankoje ir jos potencialą visuomenės transformacijai, atskleidžiamas mados gebėjimas diegti naujus kultūros modelius, mesti iššūkį nusistovėjusioms normoms ir vadovauti būsimai socialinei dinamikai. Parodoma, kaip mada turi reikšmingos įtakos formuojant kultūrinius vaizdus, kuriant kolektyvines prasmes ir skatinant socialinius pokyčius.

Raktažodžiai: mada, simbolinis interakcionizmas, prasmė, kolektyvinė atranka, socialiniai pokyčiai